

The Weekly Eater: Queen Kapiolani introduces elevated poolside dining at Deck



CINDY ELLEN RUSSELL / CRUSSELL@STARADVERTISER.COM

Grilled rib-eye steak, foreground, and grilled octopus, with a view of Diamond Head.

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It’s not easy for any institution to maintain relevance over time in the face of sleeker, newer competition.

On the hotel circuit, Queen Kapiolani Hotel, one of the grand dames of the industry, appeared to be feeling her age and at 51 last year went through a \$35 million face-lift that included upgrading guest rooms, corridors, the lobby and other public spaces. The most visible of these upgrades is the hotel’s new pool deck and 8,000-square-foot lanai that is now home to Deck., the hotel’s new al fresco restaurant.

Generally, we’ve learned not to expect much from poolside restaurants beyond casual standards such as burgers, poke and chicken wings. Deck. (the period is part of the name) reveals more ambitious plans intended to lure foodies to the far end of Waikiki.

The secret weapon in launching the spot as a destination restaurant is Masatsugu “Masa” Kubo, executive sous-chef, who as a teenager learned pizza-making in Emilia- Romagna, Italy. Upon returning home to Japan, Kubo worked for a string of Italian, French and fine-dining restaurants from Kyoto to Nagoya, including serving as executive chef at Kawabun, a 400-year-old ryotei, noted for luxurious traditional Japanese cuisine and entertainment.

Versed in what’s trending from Europe to Miami, where he also spent time working, Kubo is helping the Queen shed her staid image.

Most of his work so far can be seen on the dinner menu, although new dishes such as a Kobe beef cheeseburger are being rolled out by day. His dishes, like the setting, manage to be comfortably casual, but upscale. This could be a great place for a first date over cocktails and pupu; if it goes well, you can add on dinner. In this open-air setting, it’s easy to relax. Save for utility poles and wires that interfere with sightlines, Deck. offers a direct, close-up view of Diamond Head.

KUBO’S FOCUS is on unfussy presentations that allow quality ingredients to speak for themselves, starting with appetizers such as herbed grilled octopus served with arugula over mashed potatoes (\$15), and wagyu carpaccio (\$18) drizzled with fresh lemon oil, layered with arugula and sliced mushrooms, then sprinkled with grated Parmesan.

It’s rare for me to feel excited about a Caesar salad (\$14), but I wanted more of this one that didn’t skimp on anchovy flavor, with panko taking the place of breadcrumbs to add more substantial texture to the dressing. Thick-sliced Canada bacon also added heft and flavor.

Four mini-tacos (\$14), filled with a ceviche of king salmon, daikon, avocado, cilantro, tomatoes and jalapenos, were delicious, but the floppy tortillas couldn’t withstand the weight of the ceviche. Though intended to be a finger food, it’s best to tackle this dish with a fork. If your heart is set on salmon, I’d suggest holding out for the entree of line-caught Alaskan king salmon (\$26) with a cherry tomato and caper sauce, served with mashed potatoes. This was melt-in-your mouth, fatty fish with a crisped exterior, easily the best fish I’ve tasted in a while.

I often complain about chefs who use “creativity” to compensate for shortcomings, such as the inability to produce a decent roast chicken, but this restaurant passes that test with chicken that’s crisp on the outside and juicy on the inside, simply flavored with Maui sweet onion, garlic, salt and pepper.

Similarly, I usually avoid ordering scallops, because in unskilled hands they tend to be flabby, flavorless and waterlogged. Again, not the case here, where the scallops (\$28) have been patted dry, quickly seared and served over pesto with a cumin-scented relish of corn, tomatoes and jalapenos.

Fish lovers might also opt for a whole branzino (\$35) stuffed with rosemary and other herbs, wrapped in ti leaf and baked.

FOR THOSE who like spicy food, grilled Berkshire pork ribs (\$25) are slathered with an unusual Asian-style chili-BBQ sauce combining fruit and fire. There’s almost a li hing mui quality to it that may be an acquired taste, growing on you the more you eat.

For the tried and true, stick to a platter of grilled Snake River Farms Angus rib-eye (\$42) served with a green scallion sauce, Japanese BBQ sauce and Hawaiian salt.

Sides of truffle mashed potato (\$9.50), caramelized Brussels sprouts (\$9), roasted vegetables (\$15), fries (\$6) and brown rice (\$3.50) are also available.

The one dish I most wanted to try, the oven-baked whole lobster with uni-miso-mayo sauce (\$38), was the one I liked least. The lobster was dry and the alchemy of uni and miso turned into an overly briny paste that smelled of the ocean, in a bad way.

For dessert I enjoyed creme brulee served with seasonal fresh fruit (\$9). Deck. also has the distinction of serving what Bloomberg Businessweek magazine has called the dessert of the year, the crustless, burnt Basque cheesecake (\$9). It was created when Philadelphia cream cheese came to San Sebastian, Spain, 30 years ago. At La Vina restaurant, owner Santiago Rivera experimented with the stuff in a 400-degree oven that toasted the cheese to create a crust on all sides, and burned the top. People embraced the bitter with the sweet, and Americans are now catching on to the imperfect confection. Again, an acquired taste, one you need to try for yourself.

To make ordering easy, a \$40 prix-fixe option includes an appetizer choice of Caesar salad or mini-tacos, entree choice of salmon, ribs or steak (additional \$10), and dessert.

DECK.

Queen Kapiolani Hotel, 150 Kapahulu Ave.

Food ***1/2

Service ***

Ambience ***1/2

Value ***

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Nadine Kam’s restaurant reviews are conducted anonymously and paid for by the Star-Advertiser. Reach her at nkam@staradvertiser.com.